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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to offer possible explanations for the declining interest in regional geography. One of the major contributing factors is employment potential. Employment is perceived as being relatively limited for persons defining their interests as "regional" within geography. Students, therefore, do not enroll in regional geography courses. From the students' perspective it is only logical to select career-oriented geography courses, and since the early 1960's systematic geography courses have enabled them to do this with great ease. The quantitative revolution in geography complemented the systematic side of the discipline extremely well. Systematic-quantitative geography, because it was new, dynamic, and had publication potential and external funding possibilities, became very appealing. Regional geography lacked this dynamism. Another reason for regional geography's decline is that it requires years of study and travel to become knowledgeable about a certain region. In a publish or perish academic world, this is often not feasible for a young faculty member. The paper concludes that lack of faculty interest and student concerns will hold geography firmly in the grip of the systematic camp for some time to come. (RM)

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CAREERISM AND THE DECLINE OF REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY

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CAREERISM AND THE DECLINE OF REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY

During the past two or three decades we have witnessed the decline in the popularity of regional geography. Fewer regional courses are being offered by geography departments[1], and the numbers of geographers who describe themselves as regional specialists have also declined.[2] Not only are there quantitative measures to support this contention but the decline of professional interest in regional geography has long been felt by many teachers and researchers in the field.

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1 The 1985 issue of Schwendeman's Directory of College Geography, noted that a total of 464,940 students were enrolled in collegiate-level courses in geography for the calendar years of 1983 and 1984. Of these, some 70,132 were attending courses in world or world regional (introductory) courses. Some 33,299 students enrolled in regional courses dealing with home, city or state, North America, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, U.S.S.R, Asia, Australia, or the Third World. This amounts to 7.2% of the total enrollment recorded. Dale R. Monsebroten, (editor), Schwendeman's Directory of College Geography of the United States (Richmond, Kentucky: Eastern Kentucky University Geographic Studies and Research Center, 1985), pp. 117-127.

2 The number of members of the Association of American Geographer who call themselves regional geographers has declined sharply since 1971. In 1971 some 669 geographers (or 10.0% of the membership) called themselves regional geographers. In 1975, 572 (or 8.2%) were self-professed regional geographers. In 1978, there were 438 (or 7.2% regional geography specialists. And, in 1984, there were 318 (or 5.8%) who specialized in regional geography. A.A.G. Vol. 14, No. 4 (April, 1979), p. 14; A.A.G. Newsletter, Vol. 20, 8 (October, 1984), p. 9.

Regional geography was once the foundation upon which the discipline of geography was grounded. It represented the basis for much teaching and research.[3] How is it then, that the discipline has moved away from these roots? The aim of this paper is to offer possible scenarios to explain this situation. While we would readily admit, there must be several phenomena at play, it is our belief that forces affecting the geographer in the market place, especially employment potential, have been major contributing factors.

At the outset, it must be stated that the use of the term "careerism" in the title of this work is meant to denote job-orientation as opposed to purely academic endeavors, as related to geography. It seems to us that both academic and non-academic employment are perceived as being relatively limited for those persons defining their interests as "regional" within geography. What does the regional geographer do to earn a living? Who hires regional geographers? If students do not see clear answers to these questions then they vote their academic interests with their

3 Preston E. James and Geoffrey J. Martin, All Possible Worlds: A History of Geographical Ideas, 2nd edition (New York: John Wiley, 1981), pp. 404-426; Larry R. Ford, "A Core of Geography: What Geographers Do Best," Journal of Geography, Vol. 83, No. 3 (1984), pp. 102-106; J. H. Paterson, "Writing Regional Geography: Emerging Concepts and Techniques in the Field of Geography," in R. J. Chorley, et al., Progress in Geography, Vol. 6 (New York: St. Martins, 1975), pp. 1-26.

feet -- they do not enroll in regional courses.[4] Low enrollments cause class cancellations and the non-replacement of faculty who have specialized in teaching these courses. As a result, the market for regional geographers inside and outside of academia diminishes.

In the 1960's a student with a sound liberal arts degree was confident of securing employment. The economic turmoil of the 1970's and 1980's ended this assurance. The job market has now an abundance of college graduates. Our students realize this dilemma and specialize in their studies as early as possible in college. Their hope is to ensure a better opportunity for gaining future employment. It is this prevailing perspective that gave rise to so many more business degree programs and other vocationally-oriented types of degrees nationwide during the past two decades. With professionally-oriented degrees, students felt, and still feel, that they have a much better chance of securing employment upon graduation. If they invest four years of their young lives, plus many thousands of dollars, to obtain a baccalaureate degree they want to see some immediate return on their investment, as do their parents.

The trend in student attitudes just described has a parallel in geography. With the growth of systematic geography, the discipline had its own career-oriented

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4 Bob J. Walker and Frank E. Bernard, "Ash Pile or Rising Phoenix? A Review of the Status of Regional Geography," Journal of Geography, Vol. 77, No. 6 (1978), pp. 192-196.

options for students to pursue. The systematic specialties have clearly defined skills and applications associated with them. Thus the transport geographer, the urban geographer and the cartographer can see direct job-related applications of their studies and work possibilities in transport companies, city governments and businesses, mapping agencies, etc. The clearer the job prospect is at the end of the academic tunnel, the more attractive is the program of study for many undergraduates. This is especially true for most geography majors, many of whom do not continue their education after earning a bachelor's degree and go directly into non-academic employment. From their perspective, it is only logical to select career-oriented geography courses, and since the early 1960's the trend towards systematic geography has enabled them to do this with great ease. Furthermore, systematic geography courses have increased the opportunities to complete degree programs with higher levels of job-related specialization than was the case 20 years ago.[5]

Departments of geography and undergraduate geography majors could not have taken on increased work in the systematic subject areas unless there had been the desire to teach and conduct research in these fields on the part of the faculty. The quantitative revolution in geography lent

5 James R. Mcdonald, "Revitalizing Regional Geography: An Approach at the Graduate Level," Journal of Geography, Vol. 80, No. 2 (1981), pp.151-152.

itself to the systematic side of the discipline extremely well. While quantitative techniques can be readily applied to regional geography, it was in the form of Regional Science (a whole new sub-field separate from geography) that this occurred. The new wave that passed through geography linked the systematic and the quantitative elements in our discipline. Much was written and discussed about these two elements and many new faculty came into the profession from this type of graduate school background.[6]

What was so appealing about the systematic-quantitative geography? It was new. It was dynamic. It was the current trend. Also, publication potential was greater, as were the possibilities for external funding. These elements were, and still are, extremely important for the untenured faculty member determined to secure a "permanent" faculty position. The university administrations emphasized scholarship, while departmental chairs liked the higher enrollments and attention that the new courses attracted. Hence, systematic geography had institutional support and has become self-sustaining, even in these times of declining enrollments.

While systematic geography had great appeal regional geography seemed to lack the same dynamism. It was not new, geographers had been "regional" for a long time and the regional approach was identified with the older faculty. It was more difficult to obtain grants and to demonstrate to students the application of regional geography, especially

6 James and Martin, op cit., footnote 2, pp. 397-403.

of foreign countries, to the future work place of most graduating students. As a result, the regional perspective was emphasized less and less in geography programs. Furthermore, there may have been other more personal reasons for this decline. Regional geography requires a synoptic knowledge of the area to be studied. It represents a synthesis of both the physical and cultural environments, past and present. It requires an encyclopedic knowledge of the region to be studied. To a certain extent, therefore, regional geography represents the culmination of years of study. To teach well the regional geography of a nation or continent requires extensive travel, great familiarity with the region, the experience of living there and an understanding of the local customs and languages. It is impossible to learn all this from books. Regional geography must be experienced first hand, and not just once. As a result, it is the seasoned geographer that is best equipped to teach
about a region of the world in which he/she has an interest and for which he/she has a sensitivity. In a publish or perish academic world, this is not usually the track that a young faculty member will readily select. It should come as no surprise, therefore, to find that the best known regional geographers belong to that generation established in academia before the sweeping change of the quantitative/systematic revolution of the early 1960's. This generation is now completing 25 or more years of

professional life. These faculty are preparing for retirement and, as such, is there the possibility of a further decline of the regional approach in Geography? It is very likely. Since the current leaders of our discipline were the "Young Turks" of the 1960's, they still represent a powerful directional force in the discipline and many of these academics still believe that regional geography is descriptive, encyclopedic and of little application in the world outside of academia.[7] Hence, programs specializing in the regional approach are hard to find today, especially in graduate school, the nursery of future professional geographers.

The Future

With regional geography usually taking a back seat to the systematic fields of geography, other disciplines have garnered up this traditional role of our discipline. In recent years multidisciplinary area studies have grown up, especially Latin American and Canadian Studies.[8]

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7 John Fraser Hart, "The Highest Form of the Geographer's Act," Annals, Association of American Geographers, Vol. 72, No. 1 (1982), Annals, Association of American Geographers, Vol. 72, No. (1982), pp.557-558; R. G. Healey, "Regional Geography in the Computer Age ... A Further Commentary on the Highest Form", Annals, Association of American Geographers, Vol. 73, No. 3 (1983), pp. 432-439.

8 Canadian Studies Activity in the United States: A Profile (Washington, D.C.: Association for Canadian Studies in the United States, 1983); Barry Lentneck, (ed.), Proceedings of the Conference of Latin American Geographers, Vol. 8 (1981), 467-474.

Spearheading this growth have been the historians. Seeking an outlet for their skills, in other than traditional fields of endeavor, regional historians have grown in numbers and the positions available for them in history departments have increased.[9]

As the senior faculty retire from departments of geography and are replaced from a shrinking pool of recent Ph.D's, it is unlikely that regional geography will hold the same level of stature as it did prior to the quantitative revolution in the discipline. The need for increased global awareness on the part of our students and the renewed interest in the liberal arts at all levels of academia, makes it possible for regional geographers to play a more important role on the academic scene in regional studies.[10] The pendulum has probably reached its furthest swing away from regional geography but we do not believe that it is yet ready to return to the regional side of the discipline. The forces of faculty inertia (the lack of faculty interest), administrative perceptions, and student concerns (especially about job-related curricula) will hold geography firmly in the grip of the systematic camp for some time to come. The extent to which there will be a place in academia for the regional geographer in the future depends upon these forces,

9 John Coyne, "Geography in Area Studied: Have British Geographers Missed the Boat?", Journal of Geography in Higher Education, Vol. 8, No. 1 1984), pp.3-9.

10 David M. Helgren, "Place Name Ignorance in National News," Journal of Geography, Vol. 82, No. 4 (1983), pp. 176-178; Kevin B. McCommon, "Geographic Ignorance," National Defense (July-August, 1984), pp. 27-30.

the extent to which the regional perspective is taken up by our colleagues in other disciplines and whether we are willing to go back to regional roots again.

If one views regional study as the highest form of a geographer's craft,[11] then it is disconcerting to conclude that the profession as a whole has chosen a different route of scholarship to pursue. Rather than viewing regional studies as the most difficult part of a geographer's work, the synthesis that goes beyond analysis, we have topically divided our discipline to study individual systems rarely placing them in their spatial context - the region, the real world.

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11 John Fraser Hart, op. cit., reference 6, pp. 1-29.